

Classical Conversations and Classical Conflict

Roger A Blackwelder

Liberty University

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Abstract

This paper explores a conflict that arose with the North Lakeland Community of Classical Conversations, a homeschool organization. The paper begins with a description of the organization and a discussion of the problems which arose including disagreement about organizational goals, political machinations, and ineffectual bureaucracy. An analysis follows, describing the organization from rational systems, natural systems, and open systems approaches to identify the nature of the problems. Recent research into the motives behind homeschooling is applied to the analysis of the organizational issues. Scripture is also applied, focusing on the difference of goals between Christian homeschoolers who choose homeschooling as a refuge from the world and Christian homeschoolers who maintain an evangelistic outlook. Personal perspective is provided applying scholarly discussion of organizational conflicts and their solutions to conflicts. Nguyen's (2019) comparison of organizational conflicts with the problems faced by the families of the bride and groom planning a wedding is presented.

Keywords: Classical conversations, organizational conflict, homeschooling

Introduction

Spector (2008) begins an introduction to a discussion of conflict in organizations by stating, “Conflict, it seems, is part of the human condition” (p. 3). The interaction of human beings inevitably leads to differences in viewpoints, leading inexorably to conflicts and problems. In a lecture on church growth, Comber (2002) stated that the only churches do not have problems are stagnant churches which have ceased growing. Organizations that are growing inevitably experience conflicts, both without and within.

One organization which has experienced significant growth and the corresponding pains associated with it is Classical Conversations, an organization that brings homeschoolers together once per week to help facilitate their education. Neuman and Guterman (2019) note that in the United States in the 1970s, just a few tens of thousands of children were homeschooled, but today, it is estimated that over two million United States children are homeschooled (p. 193). As homeschooling has dramatically grown in recent years, organizations like Classical Conversations have grown as well, leading to inevitable conflicts.

Description of Organization & Issues

According to their website, the Classical Conversations organization grew from the efforts of homeschool mom Leigh Bortins who began teaching a once-per-week, classical-model program in her home (History). What began in North Carolina in 1997 with 11 students grew into a national organization with more than 104,000 students worldwide. Classical Conversations grows by capping the maximum size of each group, which are referred to as communities, and opening new ones nearby. As homeschooling has grown in popularity in recent years, the organization has grown accordingly.

The organization came to Central Florida in the mid-2000s, beginning with a single community in Lakeland. Over the past five years, Classical Conversations has grown to four communities in Lakeland with even more communities in neighboring towns. The North Lakeland community, which is the remnants of the original group, underwent significant division in 2017, resulting in one of the original, founding families electing to leave the community.

The tensions that developed within the organization can be attributed to three problem areas.

Disagreement about Organizational Goals

Members of the community came to a disagreement about the fundamental purpose and goal of the organization. Classical conversations represents itself as a homeschool program that accomplished two things: 1) providing an amazing education, and 2) equipping students with the ability to defend their faiths.

Families come together once per week to participate in the program, usually a full-day of academic classes. Younger students attend Foundations while middle-school age and older students participate in the Challenge program. Classes are capped at 10 with new communities, as they are called, being established when more than 10 students of the same grade level desire to be in the program. In keeping with homeschool tradition, the classes are taught by directors, with the title of teacher being reserved for the homeschool parents. Attendance of a parent is required for Foundations students, but Challenge students may attend the program without parental supervision.

This detail became the focal point of the disagreement at the North Lakeland Community. The question of individuals verses community became paramount when one family took an evangelistic approach, intentionally recruiting at-risk young people, who were not accompanied

by parents. This decision was not popular with many community parents who felt their own children were being exposed to the very issues they sought to avoid by homeschooling. The issue was complicated because Challenge director recruited a full class of 10 students, but because of travel, frequently left the students with a substitute who did not monitor their activities during their free time.

Political Machinations

One vocal opponent of this development was another director who may have ulterior motives. He had previously approached the director involved, hoping she would agree to trade grade levels. His own daughter would be in her class during the next year, and he wanted to take over the class to be her director. The current director had no interest in trading, as doing so would require her to leave a familiar curriculum. His dissatisfaction with her answer and his persistence to take over the class anyway undoubtedly led to increased criticism from him. Ultimately, he did get what he desired: she and her family left the community, and he assumed her class.

Pushback Against Growing Bureaucracy

This problem also highlighted an issue concerning the bureaucracy of the organization, as members of the community came to question its formal nature and heavy demands on homeschool parents. All directors, even those with years of experience, are required to attend training sessions over the summer and meet various recruitment goals, as the organization places a heavy emphasis upon expansion with new communities.

Analysis

Organizationally, Classical Conversations presents something of a paradox. Homeschool parents select to homeschool for a variety of reasons, including the desire for less formality and

oversight (Watson, 2018, p. 403). Classical Conversations appeals to homeschool parents but remains surprisingly seeped in bureaucracy. Directors must attend training sessions every summer, many being required to travel significant distances to find a training for their grade level. Directors are also required to hold two information meetings each year. These meetings are drop-in affairs, held at restaurants. They are geared towards recruiting new members to the organization through social media as well as personal contacts. Additionally, communities in a local area are required to hold summer, training sessions called Practicums. At these training sessions, parents are trained in the use of the classical model at home. A different subject area is emphasized each year. For a homeschool organization, this level of bureaucracy is curious.

Rational Systems

From a rational systems approach, Classical Conversations is leaning heavily towards goal specificity (Scott & Davis, 2015, p. 36) and formalization (Scott, 2015, p. 38). The goals of the organization are to provide a classical education and to grow and expand. The structure of the organization and resources utilized by it are focused on these goals. To accomplish these goals, strict rules regarding training are required. If challenge directors fail to make it to required training, they can be and have been banned from taking part in the program.

Natural Systems

While the rational systems approach provides insight into the fundamental nature of the organization, the natural systems approach provides greater insight into the problem that emerged in 2017. The natural systems perspective notes that the stated goals of an organization are not always the real goals and are never the only goals being pursued (Scott & Davis, 2015, p. 60). This goal complexity provides interesting insights.

One goal of Classical Conversations is to provide a classical education from a Christian perspective. This seems compatible with many homeschool parents who choose to homeschool to provide education compatible with their own religious and moral beliefs. A survey of homeschool parents conducted by the US Department of Education showed that 77% of respondents elected to homeschool in order to provide their own moral instruction (Noel, Stark & Redford, 2013). While this goal is significant with most members of the Classical Conversations organization and the families who homeschool with it, other goals, not all of which are universally embraced and pursued sometimes create conflict.

Open Systems

From an open-systems perspective, Classical Conversations could be described as a loosely coupled system. In describing these systems, Scott and Davis (2015) note that rules do not always govern actions (p. 93). A gap sometimes exists between the rules and talk of an organization and the actual behaviors and actions of the organization's members (Scott & Davis, 2015, p. 94). This perspective seems correct in analyzing the issues which arose with the North Lakeland Community of Classical Conversations in 2017.

In short, not everyone came to the community with the same, primary goal. Acquiring a classical education from a Christian perspective stands as the larger goal of the Classical Conversations organization, and though parents fell in line with this goal, others came to Classical Conversations for different reasons. Watson (2018) states, "As homeschool numbers increase, it is evident that families choose homeschooling for their children for a variety of reasons and those reasons appear to be changing over time" (p. 404). Watson (2018) points out that traditional homeschoolers once homeschooled to promote their own ideologies or to achieve

more academic rigor, but as the number of homeschoolers has increased, so have a bevy of reasons for doing so (p. 405).

As previously stated, the conflict at the North Lakeland Community developed over a disparity in goals. Some parents select Classical Conversations for the academic rigor, which emphasizes studies in Latin, public speaking and debate in addition to the core curriculum currently taught in most public schools. Other parents place greater emphasis upon the Christian elements, which is where this disagreement emerged.

Personal Perspective

This conflict might have been addressed in a satisfactory manner for all involved, but efforts to so faced the additional hurdle of covert political conflict. The challenge director in question had already been approached by another director who wanted to teach that grade level. According to the formal rules of Classical Conversations, she had every right to decline the offer to switch and continue teaching in her current role. Unfortunately, the other director did not accept that answer, and a campaign of covert political conflict began. Morrill, Zald and Rao (2003) describe hidden conflict in organizations, saying, “The occluded nature of covert political conflict is particularly salient because such opposition typically involves strategies to pursue grievances that are unprecedented or forbidden by the organization in question” (p. 394). The rules of the organization were not actually being violated, so a gradually rising murmur began, fueled by telephone calls, emails, and non-public meetings which excluded the director in question.

A resolution of the conflict might have been facilitated through the Classical Conversations organization itself. Each community is under an area supervisor, and that supervisor could have been leaned upon as mediator for the dispute, but supervisor in question

was never contacted by any of the Challenge directors or parents who were involved in the situation. This omission reflects poorly on the organization, which has created a bureaucratic hierarchy. Hahonou and Martin (2019) note that the term “bureaucracy” was coined with disdain by a French economist in 1751 (p. 123). The area supervisor for the North Lakeland Community lacked any personal knowledge of the situation or the people involved, and in fact, had less actual experience with Classical Conversations than any of the Challenge directors for the North Lakeland Community. Maranto (2019) states, “Bureaucratic organization structures work reasonably well when agencies have stable, broadly agreed-upon goals and highly certain means of achieving said goals” (p. 1). Lack of agreement on the broader, organization goals made the bureaucracy ineffective in this instance.

Nguyen (2019) insightfully compares the conflicts faced by organizations with a study of weddings, in which the families of the bride and groom “need to synthesize multiple goals and balance differences in order to achieve better solutions without discounting any of their elements” (p. 4). In describing the collective adjustment process, Nguyen (2019) compares disputants to members of an orchestra, each playing a different instrument but coordinating and adjusting to blend into the group performance (p. 5).

Nguyen’s analogy is an apt one, supported by Scripture. When the elder brother of the prodigal son returned to the house while the party for his brother was in progress, he heard music (Luke 15:25). The Greek word translated *music* in Luke 15:25 is *sumphonia*, the word from which the English word *symphony* is derived. In 2 Corinthians 6:15, Paul uses the related word *sumphonesis*, which is translated *harmony* (New International Version) or *accord* (English Standard Version). Although the NIV translation, *harmony*, retains a potential, musical

connection, unlike Luke 15:25, the context of 2 Corinthians 6 does not concern music; it concerns fellowship. Whether music is involved or not, the idea involved is to be of one voice.

One might expect a group of people who have organized themselves to provide a classical education with a Christian emphasis to be able to sit down together and resolved their conflicts easily, compromising to bring their goals into harmony. This is often not the case. Paul's epistle to the Philippians is often viewed as one of the most positive and encouraging of his letters, and while this may be true, Philippians is saturated with exhortations such as "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility, value others above yourselves" (New International Version, Philippians 2:3). This simple exhortation is remarkably difficult to put into action as "everyone overestimates the accuracy of their beliefs" (Leary et al., 2017, p. 793). Setting aside people's own prejudices and admitting the possibility that they may not have fully considered opposing points of view is curiously difficult.

Conclusion

In addressing the conflict with the North Lakeland Community, Christian individuals came together with different goals, some of which were personally motivated, and failed to resolve their differences, resulting in a Challenge director and her family leaving the community. Some might consider this a reasonable alternative, as people with different goals may be unreconcilable. This situation should not have resulted in division, though. A removal of selfish ambition and a genuine effort to consider the interests of others would have allowed continued harmony.

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